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Audio Transcript

Episode 220 of "[E&P Reports](#)" Vodcast Series
with Mike Blinder

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The banner features the E&P Reports Vodcast logo on the left, a camera lens and microphone on the right, and the URL EditorandPublisher.com/Vodcasts in the center. Below the banner is a video call grid with five participants:

- Elinor R. Tatum**
Publisher/ EIC
Amsterdam News
- Dr. Francis "Toni" Draper**
CEO/ Publisher
Afro-American Newspapers
- Patrick Washington**
CEO/ Co-Publisher
Dallas Weekly
- Nancy Lane**
Co-CEO
Local Media Assoc.
- AFRO** (Logo for Afro-American Newspapers)

At the bottom of the grid, it says "Episode Sponsor" followed by the **BLOX DIGITAL** logo.

[Word in Black's journey from a pilot project to a public benefit corporation](#)

In this episode of "E&P Reports," we explore Word in Black. This three-year-old online news collaboration includes 10 of the most prestigious Black newspapers in America that announced its transition to public benefit company status. Appearing along with Nancy Lane, co-CEO of the Local Media Association, whose foundation helped incubate the project, are founding members: Dr. Frances "Toni" Draper, CEO and publisher of AFRO News, Elinor R. Tatum, publisher and editor-in-chief of the New York Amsterdam News and Patrick Washington, CEO/co-Publisher of the Dallas Weekly.



[music]

0:00:04.2 Announcer: This is E&P Reports, a podcast from Editor & Publisher magazine, the authoritative voice of news media since 1884, serving newspapers, broadcast, digital, and all forms of news publishing.

0:00:19.4 Mike Blinder: And greetings once again, Mike Blinder, publisher, E&P Magazine. As always, we urge our listeners only that are on podcast platforms to follow us. If you are watching on our YouTube channel, there's a subscribe button below. Ring the bell to the right. You'll get an update each and every time we upload this weekly vodcast series that serves the news publishing industry, E&P Reports. I got old friends and new on the program today. Toni Draper, your third appearance, you gotta be on five times to get the special jacket. Dr. Frances "Toni" Draper, CEO, and publisher of Afro-American Newspapers in the Baltimore, Washington area. Welcome again to the program.

0:00:58.7 Dr. Frances "Toni" Draper: Thank you, Mike. So I only have two more to go. That's great.

0:01:02.2 MB: Then you, yeah, you're just in the five timers club like Saturday Night Live. Elinor Tatum, you are the publisher and editor-in-chief of the New York Amsterdam News. Patrick Washington, CEO co-publisher of Dallas Weekly. Your first appearance on the program. Welcome. It's an honor to meet you, sir.

0:01:20.6 Patrick Washington: Thank you so much. I make one correction. Now, my wife is CEO and I am just publisher and owner. That was a shift we made through the pandemic era, so...

0:01:31.3 MB: Well, that's... So, are you... Like me, my wife is our editor-in-chief and I'm the publisher.

0:01:38.8 PW: There you go.

0:01:39.7 MB: Are you like me? Do you stay apart and just email each other all day and meet for cocktails in the afternoon?

0:01:44.5 PW: [chuckle] Actually, yeah. She goes upstairs. I'm downstairs and there'll be emails transferred, sometimes even texts.

0:01:49.7 MB: Yeah. Absolutely. That's the way we operate. And then we have our meetings in the afternoon. Nancy Lane, this is your fifth appearance. Congratulations. If I had a jacket, I'd give it to you. Nancy, you and I go back almost 23 years. Do you know that?

0:02:01.2 Nancy Lane: I do.



0:02:02.1 MB: Oh, my word. You are co-CEO now, do I have that correct? You used to be CEO of the Local Media Association. You're starting to share the duties with a good friend of mine, Jay Small, at LMA. Correct?

0:02:15.2 NL: I am. Very exciting.

0:02:17.2 MB: Oh, it is. And today we'll be discussing not just LMA, but how you or your organization incubated the local media foundation, an exciting project that's now in its third year, Nancy, Word In Black, where you have aggregated 10 of the most prestigious Black publications in America so they share content and drive a common brand. Do I have that correct?

0:02:40.6 NL: You do.

0:02:40.7 MB: And you started that at the Local Media Foundation, but almost like you were bringing this into fruition as of January of 2024, it's on its own.

0:02:53.9 NL: Indeed it is. And I think it would be great for Elinor to share the story of how Word In Black was born because it was a phone call that Elinor made. Without Elinor's phone call we're not here today.

0:03:04.4 MB: All right. Well, Elinor, we're gonna hold that as the tease for the backside of this message.

0:03:09.1 Announcer: This episode of E&P Reports is exclusively sponsored by BLOX Digital, formerly Town News. Even though the name has changed, their commitment to the media industry is as strong as ever. BLOX Digital is now even better positioned to deliver integrated solutions like content management, audience development, advertising revenue, video management, and more. Join the over 2000 news publishers worldwide that power their ongoing digital transformation with BLOX Digital, serving over 141 million monthly users who view over 6.5 billion pages of content each year. You can trust BLOX Digital to empower you, to connect you at scale with the community you need to reach. BLOX Digital, formerly Town News, now reimagined to help meet the news publishing challenges of tomorrow and beyond. Learn more at bloxdigital.com.

0:04:14.3 MB: Elinor, you had the idea to aggregate the Black Publishers of America and create this common brand, and it all started with a call to Nancy?

0:04:24.8 Elinor R. Tatum: Well, it actually all started as a play date on a farm in upstate New York actually.

0:04:30.3 MB: [laughter] Really?

0:04:33.6 ET: [chuckle] So during the pandemic, I was spending most of my time in upstate New York, and I had a young daughter and I was on a farm playing with another family. And the woman that I was... Whose children my daughter was playing with was an advisor to family offices. And I asked her if there was any money for Black newspapers out there. And she said, nope, none at all. And I said, well, okay. And our kids just continued to play. And then a few months later, we were



back on the farm and George Floyd had just happened and I overheard her on a call with some people. And after she got off of that call, I went back to her and I said, is there any money for Black newspapers now?

0:05:21.5 ET: And as we're talking about philanthropic funds, and she said, yes. And I have a donor letter going out on Tuesday. This was Friday. And she said, if you have a fund together by Tuesday, I will include you in the letter. So I immediately called Nancy Lane and I said, Nancy, here's what's going on. I believe that Black publishers need support right now more than ever. And I would be interested in putting together a fund to help support Black publishers. And this is what it would look like. And this is what I wanna do, and I wanna start with a group of X publishers. And we would work together. And we started trying to craft what it would look like and what we would be trying to do. And it would be us individually creating content, but then bringing it all together to create national stories from our individual reporters, kind of being, you know, working up to a national editor. And that's how it all started. And at first it was just a fund and it sprung from that. And that was literally one phone call. And on a Friday night, by Tuesday, we had the fund set up and it went out in that next donor letter.

0:06:47.5 MB: How did you pick the... Nancy, how did you get the 10 lasso together? Or was it just a cattle call? Did you put together a list? How did you get these 10 prestigious titles to wanna come together on this?

0:07:03.6 NL: Five of them were already in a lab that we were running, including Elinor. So we went to the five and told them what happened over the weekend, and that we felt this could go to a whole new level.

0:07:17.3 MB: Going back to Elinor, Elinor, George Floyd incident happened. Why did you feel a need to collaborate with other voices at this time? Did you feel that the local content you are creating and it's being created in other cities should be shared in a common way? Or did you just wanna put together a think tank where all these great editorial platforms could start working together? What was the reason you did this? You picked up the phone and said, let's start this thing. What was the final purpose you were looking for?

0:07:53.3 ET: Well, I thought there... I always thought there should be national stories from the Black press that were created like a national Black newspaper, so to speak, but one that was actually done by Black owned publishers. And there were over times, there were people that tried to do it, I think it was about 20 years ago that they tried to do a Black Daily Newspaper.

0:08:30.4 MB: I remember that.

0:08:30.8 ET: It didn't work. Yeah. It didn't work. And I thought, well, if we've got some of the best Black newspapers involved, and they're using their writers and we are telling our own stories in our own communities and all telling the same story from the perspectives of our communities, and then bringing those together to tell that national story, isn't that a great way to share what is going on in our individual communities, but in a more holistic way to give a national picture? And so we... Through LMA, we hired a great editor. We had Nick Charles who was working with us, and we were doing some great, really quality content.



0:09:20.3 MB: Let me circle back if I may. First of all, obviously New York City, New York Amsterdam News, an established brand, obviously we just chatted with Toni that she's had a... She's at the flagship of a brand that has been around for over a century. Patrick, yours is kind of a new brand, right?

0:09:38.7 PW: I look at it now as a startup, sort of like Word In Black. It's like, it's sort of a new day, there's new products and tools. The audience has changed. So the whole perspective of what the Dallas Weekly was in even 2018 has changed drastically. And add to that, the pandemic and the virtual meeting, etcetera. And we are now in full swing with the digital transformation, which was when Word In Black came along being this sort of digital platform based national perspective, it's like it all just made complete sense. And we were able to basically put that synergy together. And as Elinor said, we created this foundational local market that could then feed into the greater topics that we were talking about 'cause it becomes almost like data points. We have 10 markets that we now have perspective and data and analysis coming into this national market from the perspective of the people that it's talking about, which is unique, the idea that it is a legacy startup is unique. The idea that it has this structure of... Excuse me, mostly young journalists who are solution-based and data-driven, unique. And so this is all just a new and exciting time that I think is really like an ushering in of what media can be and should be for the new era in the foreseeable future.

0:10:57.1 MB: I was just curious, because you're likely a... If you're like us, you're a lean and mean operation. You're doing everything you can to generate every single story you can with every resource you can. What is the end game benefit to you? Are you getting better content from this? Are you finding better reporters or better people who want to write for you because they know now, not only will their voice be in a local publication, but will get national recognition. How has this benefited you in increasing the journalism that you do?

0:11:31.8 PW: Actually tremendously. One is there's a level of mentorship, if you will, because like I said, I'm the... I'm not by any means a spring chicken, but I'm the young member. So I get to hear seasoned publishers and editors talk about building a newsroom. And I get to take that information and start from scratch in essence, doing it in my own news market. And so, and then when you talk about story creation, editing process, administration, all of that is something that is at a high level at Word In Black and has been thanks to all the publishers and with LMAs... Excuse me, administration and management. And so it's almost like getting a master class in newsroom development that I can take directly to my market. And now that the game locally is collaboration, so I'm now an authority figure in certain rooms when we're talking about collaborating with other niche market newsrooms here in Dallas. Also, we have some cousins in the News Is Out space, which is an LGBTQ+ collaboration that is doing almost the same thing.

0:12:45.3 PW: So while I get to talk locally with my local publisher here about what they're doing, how it's structured, what their best practices are and we get to do the same. The idea is that it's just like information overload. And then you can take it and apply it as needed, and you can be sure that it is top tier best practice seasoned information that you're going to be getting. And like I said, it has tremendously affected the way we were able to form our own stories, help in the national structure of our stories, the Word In Black and others.



0:13:15.0 MB: Elinor, same question. What benefit has happened for your publication and how you serve your audience through this partnership?

0:13:26.4 ET: Oh, wow. I mean, there are so many. I mean, basically everything that Patrick has just said, but it's the collaboration between all of our newspapers. It is the work and the mentorship that we all get. It is... And I think we have to talk about all the other steps that have gone on since that original... The creation of it. Because so much more has happened since the Google News Initiative, 300,000 and the website was created because it has morphed from just that publisher's fund to Word in Black, which has changed the whole dynamic. And so what we're doing now, what it started off as are two very, very different things. So there's actually a business model that goes along with it.

0:14:25.0 ET: So what it's now allowed us to do is so much different than what I actually even had my dreams set on when I thought of this. When I thought of this, it was something that was gonna help to support publishers. I never saw it as an actual business. And that's what it actually has turned into. And this is now a going concern that is a business, that is another media entity that is part of all... It is separate from our individual media entities, but it is one that we are all a part of.

0:15:13.5 MB: Toni, I don't know if there's anything left to state except Ditto, Ditto. Well...

0:15:19.7 DD: I think what...

0:15:20.2 MB: Go ahead.

0:15:20.3 DD: I would say we're the only digital news startup in the entire country that's powered by or backed by large, loyal and trusted audiences of legacy media. I think that's what distinguishes Word In Black. So we are not... So there are a lot of digital news startups in the ecosystem. There are a number of legacy, loyal, trusted audiences through legacy newspapers and other news media in the audience. But this is a marriage between the two. This is what makes it so unique. Word In Black has its own newsroom of 10 journalists now. 10 journalists with 10 distinct beats within. So think about the power of that. That's all digital content coming out. It's not linked to current events as we think of them, but current issues, for example, our series on the adultification of Black teen girls, or our series on higher education or... So we have these various beats, education and health and racial inequities and climate and all of these there. So we have a separate report for each of those. So they are producing that content on the digital platform called Word In Black. And it's also on our sites, the 10 of us, and vice versa, content is going back. So we bring the audience. So most digital news startups, you have to build this audience. You don't have this audience. We bring audience already and we build upon the audience that we have. And I think that's what makes us unique.

0:17:04.8 MB: Nancy, you must be sitting here proud as punch right now. [chuckle] I mean, hearing all this of what you helped incubate. So Nancy, this what took a lot of effort and energy and a lot of the attention of LMA. What say you about this one initiative and the others you guys are working on at the LMA and Local Media Foundation?

0:17:30.1 NL: Yeah. For all of us on the team, it's been the most rewarding project we've ever been



part of. We universally feel that way. And part of it is working with the 10 publishers. It's a joy. It's delightful. This is a wonderful group of people. Collaboration is hard. We run a lot of collaboratives. This one has no drama. Everyone is respectful. That's rare. So to start with, we had that trust, respect, long, long time relationships. Nobody doubted from day one that we were gonna do this. Not one person on our team and not one person from the publishers, that we were gonna build this into a brand and we were gonna spin off into a public benefit corporation. It was written in the original business plan in August of 2020. And from there, it just grew. And for our team to have a front row seat to help launch a digital news startup, given what we do for the industry, it was an experience of a lifetime.

0:18:33.0 NL: And we've been able to help so many others because of it. And I'll also just add something that didn't get said. The funders who've come in, Walton Family Foundation was the first, and they introduced us to Chan Zuckerberg of the foundation funders. And Chan Zuckerberg has been one of our longest supporters. They fund two education reporters. We had 440 education stories published last year from the two reporters and the 10 publishers that most of them would not have been published if we didn't have this funding. The funders also fund mini beats for all 10 publishers. So they're able to write local stories on education inequities, health inequities, name the topic, and have that journalism paid for by the foundation. So not only are the funders funding the national brand, they're funding local beats in each of the 10 markets. And that has been game changing. That has increased the amount of content that each of these publishers has been able to produce. It's helped them grow their audience, and ultimately it helps them monetize and sustain their business for the long term.

0:19:39.2 MB: In a world where we're constantly reporting on bad news for the news publishing industry, it's such a joy to have good news. And that looks like it's just gonna keep moving forward and growing. So I want to thank our guests today. I mean, a big thank you, not only for participating, but for the great work you guys are doing. Toni, Toni, Dr. Frances "Toni" Draper, CEO, publisher of Afro-American Newspapers in the Baltimore, Washington area, thank you. Elinor R. Tatum, publisher and editor-in-chief at New York Amsterdam News, and the guy who keeps saying, I'm the young startup, Patrick Washington, CEO, co-pub Dallas Weekly, and Nancy and of course, good friend of E&P as well. Thanks for your valuable time. Keep up the good work and please keep us informed at E&P on what's going on with Word In Black.

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